

Anna Gaidash: Impossible Sisterhood: Representations of the Elderly Female Characters in *Ripcord*



Virtual Conference

Anna Gaidash

Im/possible Sisterhood:

Representations of the Elderly Female Characters in *Ripcord*

The paper examines the literary portrayals of the elderly residents at the Senior Living Facility in David Lindsay-Abaire's comedy *Ripcord* (2017) in the context of literary gerontology. The purpose of the present paper echoes Wyatt-Brown statement, that "[a]ging is an important one of those "voices" in which writers and characters speak, and critics and readers must learn to hear its messages" [1993, p. 1]. David Lindsay-Abaire implements the call for visibility of older women which is one of the goals of the contemporary literary age studies and women's studies. Kathleen Woodward argues in '*Figuring Age: Women, Bodies,*

Generations’ (1999) that “gender and age are the most salient markers of social difference” and both are socially constructed [p. x]. The processes of aging and late adulthood ‘largely ignored’ (in the humanities and the arts) demand attention and analysis.

In Western civilization, Woodward detects “denial of and distaste for aging which is understood in terms of decline, not in terms of growth and change” [p. xiii]. Yet there is a trend to construct not only the narrative of decline but also to write on aging “with surety, self-confidence, even with equanimity” [p. xiv]. This is what we see in David Lindsay-Abaire’s comedy *Ripcord*.

Back in 1972, Susan Sontag states that “society is much more permissive about aging in men” than in women [p. 31]. This public attitude forms the double standard of aging which “enhances a man but progressively destroys a woman” [p. 29]. Sontag argues that “[g]rowing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – of moral disease, of social pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men” [p. 29]. I argue that in *Ripcord* (even though a comedy of manners) Lindsay-Abaire makes two old women characters not only visible but also central figures in his play. With the help of the metaphor of sisterhood (formation of female community) the dramatist not only overcomes the ageist problem of invisibility of the elderly, but also develops spiritual bond between Abby and Marilyn (initially impossible) which turns into a feasible alliance in the end of the play. Yet the male playwright employs other than Showater’s technique of piecing and patchwork for binding a female community. The playwright uses a bet between two characters as a driving force of the comedy. Lindsay-Abaire focuses on the military discourse, namely the metaphorical concept “Argument is war”, in developing his plotline and the dramatis personae. A no-holds-barred fight involves family members, facility workers, getting out of the comfort zones, tandem skydiving, robbery.

The beginning relationship between Abby Binder, a long-time resident at the fictional Bristol Place Senior Living Facility in suburban New Jersey and Marilyn Dunne, a newcomer, seems to be incompatible. In a nutshell, Abby wants Marilyn out of the room.

In *Ripcord*, the playwright does not specify the age of the protagonists who are in their seventies-eighties. That means ‘middle old age’ in general. The table below groups the antithetical characteristics of the protagonists:

Abby	Marilyn
Abby Binder is up-to-date elderly woman (middle old age) at ease with modern gadgets (e.g., iPad). The exposition scene introduces a gerontological marker of losing the sense of taste. For Abby all tastes like sand.	First introduced by Abby with an unflattering remark Marilyn Dunne presents herself as an active older adult: the woman walks daily after lunch, ‘a restless sleeper’. Marilyn is indeed a copious speaker. In the
A former grade school teacher, Abby’s professional experience still makes impact upon her personality. For example, she considers an invitation to the Halloween haunted house ‘Heat-stopping horror!’ as a literal menace of getting a	relations with her passed away husband it was Marilyn who used to sleep on her own because she snores. The dramatist emphasizes in Marilyn’s recollection the gender role reversal: “Usually it’s the husband on the couch,

heart attack [p. 21].

but with us it was *me*” [p. 12].

In the dialogue with the resident aide, the woman is unsatisfied with her new roommate Marilyn. In fact, Abby is not a cupcake herself. She does not bother to remember names and calls a spade a spade (whereas the aide uses a euphemism ‘to pass away’ she says ‘dies’; she also calls the aide ‘a scratch-my-back kinda guy’). The elderly woman can be rude: “You clearly don’t give a shit” – p. 37; “Now go fuck yourselves” – p. 63; “You motherfucker” – p. 66; “I hope you die!” – p. 76. Abby claims that her roommate is troubled because Marilyn never stops talking and always tries to make little bets with her. Even though they are rather innocent things (like guessing games, quizzes or balancing a slipper on one’s head) Abby believes them to be the stupidest ones.

Marilyn is nice to people and people are nice to her. She was an office manager in her husband’s business of skydiving.

The dowager loves a challenge. She follows the concept of “successful aging” and believes that “you turn onto an old lady if you don’t get out of the room and get some fresh air” [p. 81].

In the exposition scene, Abby pushes the resident aide to get Marilyn out of their room. When her plan fails they have a tough dialogue with mutual accusations. The aide reveals that no one wanted to live with Abby in one room for more than a week.

Then Abby makes it clear to Marilyn that she wants the room for herself. Although Marilyn knew it from the very beginning the woman refuses to transfer. Her reason is amusing – Abby reminds Marilyn of her late husband: “He was all pushback and bluster too. And I got very good at working around that. It’s sort of my area of expertise. If I lived with him, I can certainly live with you” [p. 44]. At this point Abby agrees to take Marilyn’s bet

made in the haunted house (with a symbolical name of 'Beelzebub's Den' and the minor characters of Zombie Butler and the Grim Reaper alluding to the approach of death): Marilyn will find something that makes Abby *scared* and Abby will find something that makes Marilyn *angry*. No rules. The first one is the winner.

The subject line is a chain of gags (sometimes very mean-spirited) or 'practical jokes' contrived by each of the players to achieve their goals. In the table below, the means of achieving the goal by each character are enumerated:

Abby	Marilyn
	1. Verified the message from allegedly
1. Put Marilyn's phone number on the	her daughter (invitation for lunch).
internet saying Marilyn was leaving the	Marilyn's family arrived for lunch.
country and wanted to give away her	
belongings. Marilyn's phone won't stop	2. Drugged Abby with soporific and
ringing.	sedative pills (grinding six Nytol and a
	Xanax up and sprinkling it on Abby's
2. Pretending Marilyn's daughter on the	
phone Abby left the message at the front	
desk of the Senior Living Facility of	3. Made Abby (when Abby was not
picking Marilyn up for lunch. Yet	entirely conscious) sign all the waivers
Marilyn's daughter came to visit.	before a tandem jump. Threw Abby out
	of a plane. Abby had to skydive in
3. Filled in with random numbers the	tandem with Marilyn's son-in-law.
entire sudoku book belonging to	
Marilyn.	4. Stage-managed mugging. Asked her
	daughter to mention her heart condition
4. Posted Xeroxed police reports about	for Abby.
Marilyn's dead husband including arrest	
record, drunk driving reports, domestic	5. Pretended to hang herself (with a
violence. Abby bought it online for a	trick harness) from the back of the
small fee.	bathroom door.
	6. Tracked Abby's estranged son

down, whom Abby didn't see in five
years. Marilyn called him and lied that
Abby wanted to see him.

Kathleen Woodward raises the issue of ageism that is inextricably linked with the ignorance of aging and old age: moreover, the scholar claims that "ageism is entrenched within feminism itself" [p. xi]. Patronizing is another form of ageism. The heterotopia of the Senior Living Facility reveals paternalism in *Ripcord*: when the aide suspects the two elderly women of improper behavior Marilyn remarks that they do not hurt anyone and they are not children to be scolded (which is the paternalistic or ageist attitude). Wondering whether this is a prison, the dowager says: "No, this is our home, for better or worse, and we're still free to come and go as we please, and do what we like..." [p. 87].

Another important issue studied by the literary gerontologists is the topic of generations. Intergenerational conflict is constructed between Abby and her son Benjamin: they haven't seen each other in five years because Benjamin was a hopeless drug addict. Abby doesn't trust her son even though he says he is 'clean': "I was proud, Benny. The first time you got clean. And the second time and the tenth, and after twenty years of you saying, you're clean, it gets a little hard to muster and "atta boy, kiddo" [p. 109]. Benjamin did not live up to Abby's expectations invested in him:

"I wanted to stay in my house, I wanted a healthy son ... I wanted to get old with Daddy, and take trips to Hawaii, and go to your wedding, and *grandchildren* that I could squeeze, and *spoil*. I wanted *a lot of things*, Benny. So no, it's not crazy to want to spend time with me. I spent years *wishing* you would want that. But you seemed to want other things more. And now it's too late" [p. 113].

Abby is disappointed in her only child and afraid to give him one more chance to renew their relationship. Their conversation reveals Benjamin's stereotypical image of nursing home as the endpoint of existence – he is certain that his mother is done and her only alternative is to spend the rest of her life in the room (for which Abby fights so fiercely). Yet the elderly mother surprises her son: she leads an active and satisfying life in the Senior Living Facility with trips and walking groups not to mention skydive out of a plane! Retired grade school teacher Abby is determined her son should take one more lesson of hers. In fact the woman chases off Benjamin depriving him of the chance to give her a photo of his newborn son – Abby's first grandchild.

The culmination scene in *Ripcord* demonstrates the final fight between two women. Enraged with the family involved into their bet Abby tears the painting of Marilyn's grandchild into small pieces. That makes Marilyn angry and she gives up. Leaving the room the dowager gives Abby a baby photo and remarks: "You can't give up on people. Once you do, it's all over" [p. 122].

The denouement is quite a curiosity as well: Abby is being told that Marilyn passed away the night after their conflict. Although the elderly woman does not produce any distinct response immediately, the author's remarks instruct non-verbal aspect of the play: "Abby is left alone. She looks around the room, which suddenly feels very empty. And in that moment, the fear creeps in" [p. 129]. After a few beats alive and intact Marilyn bursts in and yells. Finally Abby is scared. Abby recognized that she was scared because her competitor died. In their dialogue, the elderly women found out they felt authentic emotions of anger and fear much earlier than they confessed in the run of their bet:

ABBY

But the bet was over.

MARILYN

I don't care about the bet! I'm too touched to care! You can have the room! The satisfaction is worth more!

ABBY

No, Marilyn. You won... With Benjamin. I lied when I said I wasn't scared.

MARILYN

Good, because I lied about the sudoku. That really pissed me off...

ABBY

It's okay, because I was shitting bricks during that skydive [p. 133].